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MODERN FRENCH FICTION.

A POPULAR delusion seems to confine modern French fiction into two wide-apart currents, Naturalism and Idealism ; the former new, young and strong, the second old-fashioned, debilitated, nearly exhausted, whose struggling representatives try to fight out their last battle.

It is a delusion—popular, may be, but like most delusions, apt to fade away when submitted to serious cross-examination. Unluckily, there is nothing in the world so long-lived as error, and for many a day people will continue to think, say and print that France has no pure modern fiction, just as they say that there is no French home-life. Speak to them of Jules Sandeau and Octave Feuillet, they will sigh and say : Oh yes, then ! they were good authors, indeed—but since !

The prevailing opinion seems to be that Idealism has given up the ghost, which ghost is faintly fluttering over some poor authors scant of brains : these may only be respected for their noble, though useless endeavors to hold up a tattered banner.

There is some plea for such general though misguided opinion. Actual Naturalism, being much more riotous and offensive than his gentlemanly cousin Idealism, fights his battle with drums and trumpets, never ceasing to write notorious articles, in which he abuses all those who are not his humble slaves, and praises absurdly obnoxious but naturalist writers, untalented as well as ignorant of real French language, and tries his best to pervade the world with the idea that only bad things are worthy of mention.

That was not the leading thought of Champfleury when he wrote his novels full of minute and careful observation of common life. He considered commonplace things as worthy of notice. Has not history proved many a time how deeply little things may affect the destiny of mankind ? But he did not neglect nor discard the

real events of love and life. His literary enemies threw at him, like a stone, the new-fangled epithet of Realist. He caught it and used it as a hammer.

Thence followed a bright period of fiction. George Sand was at the highest of her power, and her deep fancies moved her readers strongly, whilst, by the purity and richness of her style, she bent even the most reluctant to admiration. Jules Sandeau gave every year one or two delightful novels. Octave Feuillet wrote a series of strong and fine novels, whose only fault for French artistic taste is, perhaps, some too outwardly apparent moralizing tone. Victor Cherbuliez, born in Geneva, but from an old French family, published his interesting tales, somewhat more philosophical than needed, but very bright and full of quaint humor. Those three may be considered as having deserved well, by the dainty and unimpeachable perfection of their style, from French literature.

Meanwhile a quiet man lived at his country house at Croissy, on the banks of the river Seine. He toiled hard at his pen, rejecting every word which did not fully satisfy his fastidious taste, spending a day over a single phrase, and throwing on the misery of a poor misled woman (*Madame Bovary*) a veil of poetry and powerful language, such as to call on her the most artistic pity. Flaubert had no well-defined programme; his studies of life were realistic, but he had a feeling of beauty, a sense for the music and rhythm of phrases which his followers—except Alphonse Daudet and Guy de Maupassant—have seldom, if ever, experienced.

Flaubert's style is not cast in the common mold, and may seem affected—it is, at times; but there is real power in it—power which extends its grasp to the minutest as well as to the grandest features of character, scenery. Some pages in *Salammbô* will remain as a splendid specimen of French literature.

About the same time Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, brothers by birth, and more than brothers by their beautiful affection for each other, conceived an idea of fiction which they thought new. It was merely an exaggeration of Flaubert's principles.

They took a special case: the life of an artist among artists, or that of a misguided maid of all work, or the conversion to Catholicism of an indifferent woman, in the mystic atmosphere of Papal Rome; and showed there such complete oblivion of all that did

not exactly belong to their subject, as to give the impression that every book had been written by a specialist, acquainted with that matter to the exclusion of everything else.

The peculiarity of their style is another imitation of Flaubert. But where he stands as a master, they often entangle themselves with a perfect maze of words and phrases. Their aim being the expression by words of things which belong not to the dominion of Thought, but to the external senses, they care little about precision. They care still less about syntax or construction ; one could almost say that they enjoy most what is utterly anti-grammatical, and they triumphantly put on the paper such phrases as this : He went down the street, with on his back, a woman's curiosity ; this meaning, that he went, and a woman was looking after him.

Strange to say, that oddity in their style, allows them sometimes to reach to a very high pitch of intense description ; they are poets, and, with all their faults, some of their books are unrivaled ; but they are untranslatable, and it is almost impossible to read them aloud, on account of the construction of their phrase.

Zola, who came next, is the man of theory, whose powerful talent at times soars very near to genius. Nobody can say what he would not have been but for the unfortunate error which led him astray from the beginning. He pretends that no fiction has a right to be, if not made out of real events, based upon what he calls "the human document." This theory would merely be the death of fiction ; newspaper accounts of accidents or murders would make novelists quite useless. Is it not the very gift of fiction to invent, to create characters and events suiting each other, and to enrobe them with the magnificent garment of poetry and style ?

Zola has proved the nonentity of his theory when he finds himself unable to bring it out into practice. He may heap "human documents," and even borrow from life real pages of history, use the newspapers as his richest mine of information—none of his characters are really living unless he forgets that they must be so very realistic, and is a writer again—an artist instead of a mere copyist.

It has been remarked that very few of the events whose faithful historiographer he pretends to be, could ever have happened to the characters whose description he has so elaborately given. There

the pretended reality of his novels ceases. Works of fiction they are and nothing else—so much the better for him. When they grow into realistic minuteness they become very dry and uninteresting.

Another fancy of his is the use of vulgar words for describing vulgar people and things which belong to them. This might be forgiven up to a certain extent when those people are conversing ; it has no reason whatever for existence when Zola becomes the describer. An author ought never to forget that by using debasing language he affords to the reader less a vivid picture than a painful exposure of self-debasement. Coarse words do not imply strength, neither can they imply beauty. One might almost say that they are rather a proof of weakness.

He never has been so powerful as when he did not voluntarily confine himself to the most repulsive sides of life ; some of his first novels will outlive the more recent ones by many years. At those times he wrote also much better than he does now. Still he never had that natural gift of style possessed by many, less worthy of notice than his powerful though infatuated self.

According to common usage, Zola ought to have a numerous brood of imitators, and there is, indeed, a whole set of young people who write disgusting things, so-called novels, following not the talent of the master, but only his faults. Those do not belong to fiction, and French readers discard them ; they can please only the vilest scum.

Still, a man of great talent has risen since a few years ; by the choice of his subjects, Guy de Maupassant seems to belong to Zola's school, but he has a gift which they have not ; a feeling both strong and dainty for poetry, and an excellent style of writing, pure, clear, almost classic. His observation of life does not pretend so much as Zola's, and is far more exact ; his conversations are life itself. When Guy de Maupassant will choose to write a novel, deliberately dropping such objectionable tales as he now seems to prefer, he will be considered as one of the brightest living authors.

Naturalists do their best to claim Alphonse Daudet as one of themselves, but he knows better. Daudet never has been a naturalist, though there was a time when he was tempted by their broad tendencies ; but the dainty feeling of romance which his Southern blood had worked into his mind, the deep love and charity

which were throbbing through his soul, could not allow him to be allured by the dry, matter-of-fact programme of naturalism.

A. Daudet is a man, and never wished to be anything but a living, loving, suffering, exulting man, following his mood. This is the cause which makes his novels so full of intense life and feeling ; by his allowing himself to be only a man—neither a teacher nor a prophet—he attains to greatness and still wins the hearts of all those who live, love, exult and suffer.

His first short novelettes were very delicate and refined, perhaps somewhat *maniéré*, but when still very young, he wrote *Fromont jeune et Risler aîné*, he proved that he had in himself the most tender shadows of dreamy poetry, as well as the power of stormy passion. From that day he was a master.

For some years, he seemed to have chosen his way among the sensational novelists, though by far the greatest ; *le Nabab* and *Les Rois en Exil* belong to that period. Since then A. Daudet appears to favor shorter tales, into those he pours all the treasures which he somewhat lavishly squandered before. His two last novels, *l'Evangeliste* and *Sapho*, have also a new form of style, more stern and noble. He is fully master of his fancy, as well as of the drapery in which he wants it to be clad, and we may be sure that now, whatever A. Daudet chooses to give us, the book will be long looked for and long praised when born.

All the novels above mentioned are, more or less—rather more than less—objectionable, in the ordinary sense of that word. Excepting Daudet's *Contes du Lundi*, *Lettres de mon Moulin* and *Le petit Chose*, in its expurged edition, none of those books ought to be left in a room where are young ladies. Nor are the novels of Paul Bourget, from first to last, to be left there. Though a man of undeniable talent he writes books painful to read and unpleasant to remember. His psychology is very demoralizing and verges too near on physiology to be accepted as idealism. Pierre Loti does not seem to care for idealism, and still he has a great deal of it in himself. His novels are of the objectionable kind, but there is so much poetry in them, and he is so full of yearning toward all that is beautiful and true, that one must feel sympathy for the author through his books. Some lines blotted and *Mon frère Yves* would be faultless. As it is, that book is the best which ever was written about a sailor's life and feelings.

We are coming now to a very different class of literary works.

People are quite ready to acknowledge the artistic superiority of our authors, provided it be settled, once and forever, that they are utterly wanting in morals.

Octave Feuillet and Cherbuliez are extremely moral, and are so much appreciated in their own country that no person having the slightest notion of culture could be excused for not having read their books. But many other and more recent works honor actual French fiction, and are justly prized. One of those most prominent novelists is Ferdinand Fabre, whose excellent style brings forward striking and splendid characters. He is expected to have very soon a seat in the French Academy.

His pictures are principally of a peculiar class of people—French priests and those who belong to them. *Les Courbezon* and *La petite Mère* are novels, but *Tigrane* and *Lucifer* hardly answer to this appellation, for there is no trace of love in these stern and wonderfully exact pictures of a priest's life-struggles and ambitions. Young ladies may find them tiresome, and if so, shall not be requested to read them, but any man who cares about his fellow sufferers ought to dive with F. Fabre into the deep recesses of those human souls who have voluntarily renounced the cares and joys of common life for an ideal of their own.

Emile Pouillon has some analogy with F. Fabre, not in the choice of subjects, but by his quaint, original way of presenting the simple-hearted peasant of our hills, *Les Cévennes*. No great events, no romantic adventures, but he knows how to win your heart. *Césette* is one of the most delightful books ever written.

André Theuriet, who loves Lorraine and its mossy forests, is a fine writer, and he, also, will certainly some time belong to the French Academy. About fifteen years ago he published a short novel, *Mlle. Guignon*, which moistened the driest eyes. *Raymonde*, coming soon after, gave him a high place among contemporary writers. Since, he holds the same place, and this is not easy in an area where meet so many competitors.

Who does not know Ludovic Halévy, the bright dramatist? Long and successfully he courted the theatre and its inmates. All of a sudden, forsaking his gods, he, through "good books," went to the French Academy. Did he think that he ought to seek forgiveness for all his clever and funny, but objectionable works, when he wrote *l'Abbé Constantin*, and the short novellettes which followed this delightful and innocent little tale? If so, he will

not only be forgiven but blessed also by the lovers of pure artistic literature.

A new book of Anatole France, *Le Livre d'un Ami*, has recently followed his charming and simple tale, *Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard*. Such novels as that are like an hour's halt in the rocky path of life. The same thing must be said of Louis Ulbach's *Madame Fernel*. Among the many bright works of Hector Malot, one is a gem: *Sans Famille*. Though it is the story of a child, it is not a novel for children only. Many a grown-up man has not left the book until it was fairly ended. Some of Ereckman-Chatrian's tales have often the same fate: *l'Ami Fritz*, and specially *Les deux Frères*, full of human truth and kindness. All the books of that friendly pair are pleasant and useful to read.

The death of E. About has left a blank in our literature. No one has picked up the pen which he suddenly dropped. So much sparkling wit, ready humor and feeling, are scarcely ever to be met together. *Germaine* is a masterpiece which shall live when many of those who now pretend to fame shall be buried in oblivion. *Les Mariages de Paris* and *Les Mariages de Province* will for years to come afford joy and delight to the lovers of French *esprit* and universal homely wisdom. About was, indeed, the representative of a large part of our nation, and none has ever been more thoroughly a Frenchman.

Last but not least comes Th. Bentzon. This name is a pseudonym for a talented lady, Mme. Blanc, who has written several novels full of charm. One of them, *La petite Perle*, is well named, for it is, though a little pearl, indeed a real jewel. Mme. Blanc not only graces our country, but she knows and appreciates American literature. It is through her able pen that French people who do not know English are acquainted with American novelists. Her excellent articles in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, have spread all over Europe the name of many an author, and her translations are so good that nobody yet complained of them—which must be the highest standard of perfection, as translations are generally found deficient by the author himself or by his friends.

Many a name might be added to the list, but minor celebrities may be kept aside till they grope their way to real fame. Others, like Victor Hugo, Balzac, etc., belong to a more remote period. Actual French fiction is represented fairly enough in these pages, and the reader may see that if the Naturalists are a more noisy set,

they are far less numerous than the other groups of authors. These would not like, probably, to be called Idealists, the expression having grown somewhat oldish, but they are nevertheless the faithful followers of Ideal. They prove also by their works that one may worship Ideal and be at the same time a very careful observer of real life, whose humble cares are often redeemed by some simple poetry and touching self-forgetfulness.

HENRY GRÉVILLE.